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SUBJECT: PASSIONS AROUSED AT JERUSALEM DAY DEMOS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The annual Al Quds International Day demonstrations October 28 drew thousands showing their support for the Palestinian people. Participants chanted anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans while carrying Bahraini, Palestinian, and Hezbollah flags along with pictures of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei. Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid Al Khalifa expressed concern to the Ambassador about recent statements from the Iranian president and the influence they might have in the Bahraini Shi'a community. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) A sizable crowd (estimates ranged from 2,000 to 8,000) of Bahraini men, women and children, led by leading Shi'a cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem and opposition political society Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman, participated in a demonstration October 28 after Friday prayers in honor of Al Quds (Jerusalem) International Day. The annual (last Friday of Ramadan) event began at Seef Mall in the north-central part of the island and ended at the Pearl Roundabout approximately two miles away. A second demonstration on the island of Muharraq received less attention.

¶3. (U) Protesters chanted anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans while many carried Bahraini and Palestinian flags in support of the Palestinian cause. Some protesters carried posters against the U.S. and Israel, including at least one that said "Israel Must Be Wiped Off The Map," a reference to Iranian President Ahmadinejad's recent statements. In addition, U.S. and Israeli flags were reportedly stepped on and burned. A group of clerics who spoke during the protest reportedly urged demonstrators against carrying symbols unrelated to the Palestinian struggle. Nevertheless, some marchers carried Hezbollah flags and pictures of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Returning to a familiar theme, radical Sunni Salafi MP Shaikh Jassim Al Saeedi publicly denounced the use of Hezbollah flags during the rally.

¶4. (U) Recent public debate on the formal closure of the Israel Boycott Office in Bahrain has stirred up public emotions, although this year's rally was reportedly smaller than last year's. The rally provided an opportunity to launch a petition, signed by many of the demonstrators, to reject the lifting of the boycott. The Al Quds International Day organizing committee intends to present the petition directly to the King.

¶5. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador October 29, Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid Bin Abdullah Al Khalifa attributed the presence of Hezbollah flags and pictures of the ayatollahs to Ahmadinejad's recent statements about Israel. He said these symbols were not seen last year. Shaikh Rashid expressed his concern about the effect Ahmadinejad's statements may have upon the region and about the direction Ahmadinejad is taking Iran. He said that the GCC will need to consider how to counter Ahmadinejad's influence, and that Shi'a elements in Bahrain will need to be watched more closely. Shaikh Rashid suspects that Ahmadinejad may be trying to deflect domestic attention from his own government's lack of progress.

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